

VZCZCXRO0578
PP RUEHDBU RUEHPW
DE RUEHBUL #1195/01 1301309
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 101309Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8813
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 0043

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 001195

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV PREL AF
SUBJECT: INSIDE KARZAI CAMPAIGN HEADQUARTERS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. President Karzai officially launched his re-election campaign last week, relying on an unusual mix of powerful commanders from Afghanistan's 30 years of conflict and a small group of younger volunteers from newer pro-democracy organizations. To date, former mujahideen commanders like First Vice President nominee Marshall Fahim and Lower House MP Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf have focused mainly on raising money and engaging other high-profile Afghan leaders for support, leaving the logistical operations of campaign work to the younger crowd. Karzai himself has concentrated on locking up support from old-guard leaders, causing some reformist supporters to question their commitments to a campaign that rewards the leaders of the past and ignores the support of democratic groups. End Summary.

A Glimpse At Karzai Campaign HQ

¶2. (SBU) Karzai opened his campaign headquarters last month in a busy neighborhood near the Palace and the U.S. Embassy. PolOff dropped by the office recently and spoke with the three campaign staffers who were present. The staffers were young, energetic, and computer literate, though insistent that any conversations be "off the record" in case their bosses heard they had spoken to a Westerner. The rented three-story home has separate offices reserved for the campaign's top lieutenants: VP nominees Fahim and Karim Khalili, Lower House MP Sayyaf, Palace policy chief Sebghatullah Sanjar, and Kabul Governor Haji Din Mohammad. Campaign staff said Mohammad will play the lead coordinating role for the campaign once he resigns his governor post. Much like a U.S.-style campaign office, phone banks, office equipment, and conference rooms occupy the remaining space.

¶3. (SBU) Most of the top lieutenants' offices looked empty and unused. Campaign staff explained that Fahim and Sayyaf preferred to work out of their homes, while Khalili, Sanjar, and Mohammad were still weighing how to balance their government positions with their campaign duties. Campaign aides said they were completely focused on Karzai's campaign and were not working for pro-Karzai provincial council candidates. As PolOff arrived for his visit, one staffer was posting a BBC Persian article on Nangarhar Gov. Gul Aga Sherzai's withdrawal from the presidential race and subsequent endorsement of Karzai on a bulletin board. The other two aides were reviewing media reports on Karzai's trip to Washington.

¶4. (U) Campaign staff said they expected activity at the office to increase after the June 12 publication of the final candidate list. Until then, they will be busy with renovations and early-stage campaign preparations. Inside the "media room," staff had hung dozens of posters and T-shirt samples with pictures of Karzai. Staff had digitally altered Karzai's clothes, headwear, and an adjoining campaign slogan in each image to appeal to various ethnic and linguistic constituencies. Following the start of the official campaign period, aides will distribute the specially

designed campaign materials to Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Baluchs, and Nuristanis.

Old-Style Afghan Politics And Modern Election Regulations

15. (SBU) Campaign lieutenant Sanjar, one of the only members of the campaign's leadership with experience in democratic politics, told PolOff he and other reformers in the Karzai campaign occasionally feel Karzai and other top aides do not appreciate the contributions democratic groups have made to the campaign, especially in light of the low workloads taken on by supposedly influential lieutenants. Sanjar expects volunteers from democratic parties, and not Sayyaf and Fahim loyalists, will staff satellite campaign offices in the provinces when they open later this month.

16. (SBU) In late April, Karzai tasked Fahim, Sayyaf, Mohammed, Khalili, and Sanjar to collect the 10,000 signatures and copies of voter registration cards needed to qualify for the ballot. Sanjar utilized his party network to collect 2,000 signatures. However, Sanjar said Sayyaf, who leads his own political party, brought in just 100 voter registration cards. Fahim, nominated for the vice presidency in part because of a supposed influence in Tajik communities, brought in just 15. Khalili, who heads a faction of the majority-Hazara Hezb-e-Wahdat party, asked 100 people to show up at the campaign office, but only 15 of those were registered voters. Frustrated, Palace officials asked Sanjar to extend his efforts to the provinces and work with local officials to collect the necessary signatures. In the end, the campaign collected 15,000 signatures and qualified for

KABUL 00001195 002 OF 002

the ballot on time) though Sanjar wished Karzai would have acknowledged the role of democratic groups in his registration.

A Modest, Though Probably Sufficient Effort

17. (SBU) Just three months before the election, Karzai's campaign headquarters still has the feel and resources of a sleepy mayoral election-level campaign office in the US. Still, its scope and budget far exceed the efforts of the other campaigns we have seen) we believe fewer than 10 of the more than 40 presidential candidates even have campaign offices outside of their private residences. The lack of a truly strong challenger in this year's election and Karzai's apparent preference for negotiations with mujahideen leaders over grassroots political campaigning will probably mean a continued lack of attention for his young, democratic supporters. For the long-term though, we hope these young activists gain valuable experience in political campaigning that they will be able to put to good use in next year's parliamentary elections and future presidential elections. This experience should benefit reformist, democratic candidates who run campaigns based around ideas and political parties, rather than personalities from the mujahideen era.

RICCIARDONE